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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ZAGREB 000417

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DEPT FOR EUR/SCE - ENGLISH, BELL
DEPT FOR H - PLEASE ADVISE OFFICE OF SENATOR VOINOVICH

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TAGS: [OREP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SR](#) [YI](#) [HR](#)
SUBJECT: SENATOR VOINOVICH PROMOTES PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR
NATO, CROATIAN MODEL FOR KOSOVO STABILITY

REF: A. ZAGREB 398

- [1](#)B. ZAGREB 384
- [1](#)C. ZAGREB 356
- [1](#)D. ZAGREB 337

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Greg Delawie for reasons 1.4 (b)
& (d).

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Senator Voinovich met March 23 with President Stjepan Mesic, Minister of Foreign Affairs Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic, and Parliamentarians from across the political spectrum to discuss NATO accession, Article 98 (ref A), and Croatia's potential role in resolving Kosovo's final status. The Senator reinforced previous USG calls for increased public education regarding NATO membership. The visit was also an effective way to prompt more local discussion about how Croatia, as a leader in promoting regional stability, can contribute to a lasting solution for Kosovo. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

PUBLIC SUPPORT KEY TO NATO ACCESSION

[1](#)2. (U) Senator Voinovich congratulated Croatian officials on progress toward NATO membership, particularly the arrest of ICTY indictee Ante Gotovina. However, he expressed his concern about low support for NATO among the Croatian public and called for a robust public discussion of the benefits and obligations of NATO. The Senator said he sees NATO and the EU as the glue that will keep the region together.

[1](#)3. (C) President Mesic said that he believed support for NATO was relatively strong in Croatia, although he agreed with Voinovich's suggestion that he take a more assertive role in explaining the benefits of membership to the public. Mesic said that there was broad consensus that Croatia's future lies in Euro-Atlantic institutions and that only a recalcitrant political fringe (he was alluding to the extreme right) is intent on keeping Croatia isolated. While acknowledging that he and the government can do a better job of promoting NATO, Mesic said that he believes that if membership were put to a referendum today it would pass.

[1](#)4. (C) Tonino Picula, Member of Parliament from the opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, agreed that effective public support for NATO membership was critical, adding that the public must realize that armies are not invited to join NATO, but rather democracies.

[1](#)5. (C) Milorad Pupovac, MP of the Independent Serbian

Democratic Party (SDSS), said Parliament should have more active discussions on NATO membership which can serve as the basis for public debate. He pointed out that Croatians' number one overwhelming concern is security, and because of terrorism, they see NATO as a security risk rather than a security provider. Croatian leaders have the responsibility to change this view, he said.

¶6. (C) Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) Parliamentarian Tonci Tadic said politicians must do for NATO membership what they did for EU membership: declare a multi-party political pact, establish a special parliamentary committee, and focus government resources. Kresimir Cosic, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) MP and head of Croatia's delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, said he will pursue a resolution at the next Parliamentary Assembly in Paris calling on NATO leaders to hold an expansion summit at the earliest opportunity.

FOREIGN MINISTER ON CROATIA'S EURO-ATLANTIC STRATEGY

¶7. (C) While not specifically addressing the issue of public support for NATO, MFA Grabar Kitarovic stressed Croatian commitment to reform. She said Croatia is playing a leadership role in regional stability and economic development and increasingly active in peacekeeping missions in other parts of the world. As a past beneficiary of international peacekeeping, Croatia feels an obligation now to contribute and pay this back.

¶8. (C) On EU accession, the Minister added that Croatia is working hard to keep up momentum despite expansion fatigue among certain members and has screened 50 percent of the legislation that needs to be harmonized with the *aquis communautaire* before accession. She said Croatia will oppose the introduction of any intermediate status for aspirants before full EU membership, stressing that membership is key

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to stability in the region and the driving force behind reforms. Grabar Kitarovic explained that Croatia is now focused on fighting corruption, a key accession issue. The GoC recently unveiled a national strategy to combat corruption (ref B) and will stress this fight along with law enforcement cooperation during its upcoming chairmanship of the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECp).

CROATIA AS MODEL FOR MINORITY RIGHTS IN KOSOVO?

¶9. (C) During all meetings, Senator Voinovich expressed his fear that a mishandling of Kosovo's final status could bring extreme nationalists back to power in Belgrade, creating problems for SaM, the region, and the larger international community. He suggested that Croatia could offer to Kosovo a model for ethnic cooperation and reintegration.

¶10. (C) President Mesic did not respond directly to the Senator's suggestion, but said that he did not believe the problems in Kosovo were intractable, although he noted that the tensions there predated even Milosevic's rise to power in Serbia. NOTE: Mesic has expressed interest in the past in playing a coordinating role among regional leaders, having called for regional summit in Tirana to discuss Kosovo's future, but he did not raise this with the Senator. END NOTE.

¶11. (C) MP Pupovac shared the Senator's concerns regarding Kosovo and the right wing in Serbia, but expressed confidence in new Kosovo Prime Minister Agim Ceku. He called for intensified contacts between Pristina and Belgrade, saying these negotiations must create the space for solutions. According to Pupovac, Croatia has a strong interest in assisting in Kosovo. Several parliamentary committees are actively engaged with Belgrade and Pristina, he noted,

particularly the Committee for European Integration.

¶12. (C) Pupovac cautioned, however, against seeing Croatia as a directly transferable model for Kosovo. He pointed out that the situation regarding minorities and refugee returns in Croatia, while technically similar to Kosovo, was symbolically much different, particularly with regard to Zagreb and Pristina's differing historical relationships with Belgrade. He did offer, however, to assist the ethnic Serb community in Kosovo in being "strong enough to negotiate" -- seeing that they can exist as a minority and have their rights protected.

¶13. (C) MP Cosic, as a former JNA general with experience in Kosovo dating back to the 1970s, noted the huge differences in culture and mentality between ethnicities in Kosovo, and said the mentality of the common people must be changed. He cited the dramatic change in public opinion in Croatia during the past 15 years. Today, he said, the majority of Croats believe minority rights for Serbs are important, not just politically, but for the good of society. Cosic noted that Kosovo PM Ceku worked for him during his JNA days. He is extremely professional, Cosic said, and can change these attitudes. According to Cosic, he needs to focus on the young Albanian population.

¶14. (C) MP Picula called Kosovo the heart of the southeastern Europe crisis, and warned that we cannot isolate Belgrade-Pristina relations without thinking of entire region. All countries in the region share the same foreign policy target -- EU membership -- but they suffer from fragmented, biased relations within the region. He called on the international community in general and the EU in particular to play a greater role and serve as an umbrella for all countries in the region. Picula noted Croatia's special interest in stability -- there will be no increased foreign investment or tourism if Croatia is seen as living in a bad neighborhood. Instead, Croatia must be seen as part of the solution.

¶15. (C) MFA Grabar Kitarovic stressed that peace and stability must be the goal in any solution. Croatia does not take a position on what the final solution for Kosovo is, she said, just that it is done with stability in mind. It is clear we cannot return to the pre-1999 situation, she emphasized. The Minister said she does not believe the region could sink into another armed conflict, because the radicals are not as strong as they try to show themselves to be. While another rabidly nationalist government in Belgrade would be terrible for Serbians, Kosovars and Montenegrins and would bring regional cooperation to a standstill, these forces do not have the strength to mobilize again for territorial gains. With that in mind, she said, we must

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remember that losing Kosovo would be a strain for Belgrade and it is important for us to help them accept a resolution. For its part, Croatia is trying to avoid creating any other difficult situations for Belgrade, instead focusing on positive bilateral relations, agreements, and high-level visits.

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